

ACTIVE LEARNING FRAMEWORK CONSULTATION FORM

The consultation is part of the Novigado project's O2 "Active Learning Reference Framework".

How should active learning look like in a school?

By Catherine Becchetti-Bizot, National education and higher education mediator

There are pre-conditions for implementing any kind of active pedagogy. It is necessary to have a mindset with no dogmatism or golden rules. Active pedagogy, by definition, adapts to fit the student's circumstances. The teachers must be effective listeners, as then they will always be ready to deal with anything unforeseen that happens in class. The idea of adaptability and flexibility is very important. A teacher cannot do active pedagogy simply by using "turnkey" cue cards. This does not mean however that teachers don't need to prepare their courses meticulously beforehand or formalise certain procedures. On the contrary, the wider the field of possibilities, the more the preparation of the teaching periods, their progression and their pace must be carefully thought out and defined. The teacher's authority and control over the class depends in large part on this preparation, not just on proficiency in the content being transmitted. In active teaching, the authority of the teacher shifts. Without trying to control everything, the teacher ensures that the students stick with what he or she has proposed and that they are held accountable, and plans strategies to make sure this happens. He or she is capable of providing, at just the right time, the elements that will help the students to work by themselves.

Four scenarios in the form of a narrative illustrate different ways that active learning could be designed by secondary schools:

i. The Teacher

The students have been working on the project for a week. They have created a project with topics that span three subjects: biology, mathematics and French. They have created a timetable for the course, scripted the activities, clarified the instructions and everything is ready for them to work autonomously. The teachers were inspired by an experiment at a European school and they have adapted it to fit their students. As well as producing and exchanging resources with each other, they are also using resources from national and international sites. After organising the students' activities, the teachers give feedback to the site from which they got the resources. These are teachers who like to give their opinion on the resources that they are using; they are the curators of the resources. In fact, their project with the students forms part of an action-research project in which they and a university laboratory are taking part. Throughout the project, they are documenting their experiences and altering the process by adapting the scenarios to the needs of their students.

In the classroom, following the given framework, the teachers are watching the students work freely. Each teacher *"gives the explanations needed, regulates and paces the activities, reminds the students of and clarifies the instructions and organises times for group overviews and evaluations. There are many interactions, frequent movement, mentoring and helping each other are encouraged, even if they are not always effective,*

*and the results are shared and negotiated*¹. In fact, the results of the projects and experiments, and what has been learned are constructed during interactions between the students and the teacher. The teacher leads the students to negotiate the conclusion by elaborating on their arguments. He offers them support for thinking about the project, answers their questions, encourages them, draws their attention to important points to be taken into account or to be questioned. The teacher guides the students. The students have discussions with the teacher that are more horizontal than vertical. The relationship between them is based on help and support.

ii. The Students

From a distance, you get the impression that it's break time for the students even though they are doing something. The room is big, the furniture is easy to move, each team goes to the place that best suits the tasks that they are performing. Sometimes, long discussions end up in the corridor. Up close, you can hear quiet discussions, lines of argument and laughter. In fact, the students are in class and they are working on a project in small groups. They had to choose one of several topics that their maths, biology and French teachers offered to them. After internal negotiations, the students chose the one that most interests the majority of the team, the one that won over those who had no particular opinion.

It is time to make group decisions. The students on the team come back to their island; they are aware of what they need in order to organise their space for the next activity. The discussion starts. The students call a fellow student who is convalescing and working from home. Once they are all connected, the discussion begins: how will they do it and what final product will they produce? A radio programme or an online newspaper? How will they approach the subject? To come to an agreement, the students use mental maps. They create and consult their common work plan, road maps, resource sheets and method sheets. They know that their project is part of a bigger action-research project in partnership with a university laboratory. They analyse what they must contribute. From her seat, one of the students is researching participatory science on her mobile phone. Another student is looking at video clips on his computer. A third student joins them. He has just found a video that has made him laugh and the group now starts to watch a sequence of funny videos. They laugh and joke. When the hubbub grows, classmates in other groups ask them to be quiet as they are recording their presentation. A short time later, the students get back to work as they will soon have a videoconference with a twinned class in England. They have to get ready. It's funny, the English students have decided to take on the same project as theirs but, in their context, that changes everything. The students have an online discussion.

Before presenting the project to the class as a whole, the students evaluate what they have learned, they correct their peers' work and help them to identify any possible

¹ Becchetti-Bizot, C. (2017). *Repenser la forme scolaire à l'heure du numérique. Vers des nouvelles manières d'apprendre et d'enseigner.* (Rethinking education in the digital era. Towards new ways of learning and teaching). Report from the General Inspectorate of National Education. Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Research

errors, based on a grid drawn up by the entire class. They know that this part of the work is important for their summative assessment and for the action-research project.

After this work session, the students meet for the lesson that the French teacher is going to give, 15 minutes of explanations, and then they move on to the activity. For that, they go out into the garden and sit on the ground. The class can start.

iii. The Family

At home, the students continue working, following the teacher's precise instructions and a work plan. Sometimes, when they are really involved in the project, they arrange to stay in the classroom during break to continue working. At other times, the students continue working at home on their own initiative. They spend the time thinking about how to solve a problem. They make an agreement with the teacher for some extra support to be given. They do different activities. Their parents are kept up to date on the topics that their children are working on and the way the teachers are dealing with them. In fact, the parents took part in a workshop-class on project-based education given by the biology teacher.

iv. Space and Time

The school's spaces and time are as "open-plan" as possible. Several spaces were designed in a project involving the students, the teacher and an artist. The rooms are very modular, and they are welcoming, flexible, friendly, sometimes opening to the outside and they are equipped "*so as to stimulate creativity and allow projects to flourish*,"² to do research, work together, watch videos, concentrate and record. They are often multi-functional spaces that are not only used for school activities: they serve as both classrooms and for extracurricular and out of school activities.

Digital equipment and a wide variety of modelling supplies (paper, cardboard, wire, etc.) are provided for the students. These rooms accommodate "*frequent changes of activity, group work and freedom of movement of the students, the possibility of plugging in and recharging digital equipment, reading comfortably on-screen, recording, experimenting and exchanging ideas and impressions*"³. The students move around and change places with no fixed timetable, or permission from the teacher. The classroom is their space⁴.

The classroom is also a place where the teacher moves around between the rows and islands. These spaces allow the students to have all the autonomy that they need for their individual or group work. There are posters, drawings, figures on sheets pinned on the wall. The students create, discuss and collaborate on common projects, help each other and experiment together.

Sometimes the students are sitting down, sometimes they have discussions standing up, one student explains to another something that he or she did not understand, and at times the teacher takes over to make a point, or check on how the students are doing

² *Op. cit*, p. 42.

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ *Ibid*.

by asking questions, such as “Do you need anything? What progress have you made?”, etc. The teacher offers advice and reminds them of the rules. There are moments of synthesis when the teacher gives a traditional class and makes sense of the issue being tackled and the objectives to be met.

What would you recommend that teachers do to set up active learning?

First of all, the teachers need to accept the idea of a classroom with working environments that contribute to the students’ physical and mental activity, both individual and collective. After this, they need to accept that, instead of preventing the students from working, digressions can be a catalyst for ideas, if the student’s work keeps pace with the project. After that, they will allow movement and noise in the classroom, without trying to be in total control, so that the students can learn and the objectives of the class can be met.

In regard to preparing the lesson, teachers must present the activities and the instructions for carrying them out to the students effectively. The project must be presented as a challenge with a work plan that is structured and has its own pace. The teacher needs to clearly present the meaning of what is going to be done, the stages and the objectives to be met before forming the work groups and getting them to work autonomously. There is a physical situation and an appropriate space for each objective and each activity. Autonomous work will be supported by group discussion and several students seeking information or solutions together. If the students really understand what they need to do, they are not going to want to break up because they will need to keep up and will be motivated by the activity. As they have to present their work to the other members of the class or by videoconferencing, they will need to summarise and formalise their results, so as to be able to communicate them and exchange them with others. However, when the children are very young, their work must be carefully managed. The fact that their work is structured does not mean they are not involved in active learning. In fact, the more their work is structured, the more autonomous the students become. It will be necessary, therefore, to “hold their hands” longer and let them go very gradually. If the project is complex, it will be necessary to guide them at the beginning. It is also necessary to encourage them to take the initiative. To do this, it is necessary to trust the students.

A good teacher is one who manages to find a role for all the students, even for the one who is having the most difficulty.

Implementing active teaching cannot be taken for granted: the teachers must need to innovate. If you want to move towards this kind of teaching, the teachers must not be forced into it. They have to be allowed to observe, be inspired and share with each other, without obliging them to implement this type of teaching, if it does not suit them. The idea is to make them want to change their approach. You could open up the class so that all the teachers can see what the others are doing (open classroom). Often, the mere fact of seeing that they can work differently changes perceptions: they have to be shown the successes and the possibilities, without being obliged to take them on. People often moralise about innovation. This does not help teachers who do not feel drawn to the new methods. It can lead to some teachers having a complex about it. Again, to transition to active teaching, there must be no dogmatism and no golden rules. There are lecture-type classes that are appreciated by students, because the teacher’s words are enough for them. There are no good or bad teaching methods. All that is needed is

for teachers to feel that they are in a tolerant, flexible environment, open to multiple ways of teaching and giving classes.

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